DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 285 216 CS 505 641

AUTHOR Wilson, Kent
TITLE Begging the Question: Some Pragmatic Aspects of Argument.
PUB DATE Apr 87
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Meeting of the Conference on Critical Thinking (Newport News, VA, April 9-12, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Context Clues; Inferences; Linguistics; *Logical Thinking; Mathematical Logic; *Persuasive Discourse; Philosophy; Pragmatics; *Rhetoric
IDENTIFIERS Fallacies; *Petitio Fallacy; Propositional Analysis; Questions; Salience

ABSTRACT

Begging the question, or the "petitio" fallacy, is problematic for logicians because rules of logic dictate that if an argument of a particular form begs the question at issue, any other argument of the same form also begs the question; yet such questions can appear satisfactory in other contexts. The fallacy benefits from considering the principles of discourse. The main question is how to generalize from the simplest circular arguments (such as: P1, P2, ..., Pi,..., Pn/ therefore Pi) to other instances which involve the application of only a single rule of inference (for example, P & Q/ therefore P). The answer lies in the pragmatic concept of context of a discourse, which is generally anything that bears on the interpretation of utterances in the discourse. Crucial notions are whether propositions in context are "established" (accepted by the parties to the discourse), "challenged" (one participant is disposed to dispute a proposition), or "removed" (a participant challenges or withdraws a proposition). Salience--whether or not a proposition is directly relevant to the context--is also important. Raising a question is equivalent to challenging a proposition (P), which in return removes from the context all salient propositions which immediately imply P and implicates that the conversational participants must exclude P and what it implies from their response. If the respondent includes propositions standing in salient evidential or meaning relations to P in the response, he or she is begging the question. (Extended logical examples and a list of references conclude the document.) (SKC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED285216

Begging the Question: Some Pragmatic Aspects of Argument

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Kent Wilson
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Kent Wilson

University of Illinois at Chicago

Begging the question has presented a vexing problem for logicians and rhetoricians. On the one hand, an argument that is question-begging in one context can appear to be satisfactory in another context. On the other hand, it has struck many philosophers that the circularity of an argument can be characterized formally. This has the consequence that if an argument of a particular form begs the question at issue, any other argument of the same form also begs the question. Yet in particular instances, this conflicts with clear intuitions.

Several different approaches have been taken to resolve the tension. One of the more popular attempts to characterize the petitio fallacy is to appeal to epistemic or doxastic principles of argument. I have argued[1] that such an approach is misguided. The approach taken below is to consider principles of discourse in understanding the fallacy of the petitio. While such an approach has been developed in the literature on the problem, most notably by Hamblin and Mackenzie[2], these approaches have

[1] In "Circular Arguments", Metaphilosophy forthcoming

[2] See the bibliography for citations.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

CS 505 641

been hindered by failure to make several important distinctions which enable us to gain better purchase on the problem of characterizing the petitio fallacy.[3]

First, circular argument may be usefully distinguished from question-begging argument. The two notions are motivated in very different ways, by different metaphors. It is reasonable to expect that circular argument can be characterized formally; the basic idea is that the conclusion appears as a premise (in some guise or other). There is little reason to think that question-begging argument can be characterized formally; an argument begs the question when an illicit assumption of some kind (yet to be characterized) is made. The two are identified because the extensions of the concepts have a non-null intersection: some circular arguments are question-begging. But not all are; nor are all question-begging arguments plausibly characterized as circular. In the simplest sort of cases, in the circumstances most commonly presumed by those analyzing the problem, an argument is circular if and only if it begs the question. These will be arguments of the form

(1) $P_1, P_2, \ldots, P_i, \ldots, P_n$ /∴ P_i

occurring in a context where one is required to give an argument which evidentially justifies the conclusion. In that sort of context, it is easy to understand why an appeal to epistemic

---

[3] In this short paper, I cannot motivate these distinctions in detail. Furthermore, it is impossible to argue for each substantive claim that is made here. I provide motivation and argument in several other papers.

principles appears relevant. However, argument--including question-begging argument--may occur in contexts where knowledge and belief (of conclusions and of premises) are not at issue; for example, in the course of drawing the implications of some proposition that all parties believe or know to be false. (Imagine a forensic contest where one side is given the task to argue that the diagonal of a square is commensurate with a side.)

The advantage of distinguishing between circular and question-begging arguments comes to this: each notion can be defined without the burden of capturing instances of argument that fall clearly under the other concept. Consider one example: Aristotle (and many others) claimed that an argument of the form

(2) Everything is P /∴ a is P

begs the question (contexts can easily be found where this claim is clearly correct). Yet where is there any circle? The conclusion does not appear as a premise. My concern in this paper is with question-begging arguments and not with circular arguments.

Question-begging arguments have forms that are more varied than those represented by the simple form (1) above; for example, (2) is a form of argument that in some contexts is question-begging. This diversity may come about in one of two ways. First, the diversity may arise by virtue of a different inference rule being applied besides Reiteration (which can be thought of as being responsible for arguments of the form of (1) being circular). Thus,besides (2), for example, rules of inference

such as Conjunction Elimination (3) and Conjunction Introduction (4):

(3) P & Q /∴ P

(4) P, Q /∴ P & Q

might plausibly be regarded as question-begging in an appropriate context. Here, only a single rule of inference is involved.[4] The problem is to determine which arguments consisting of only a single application of a single rule of inference are question-begging. I call this "the generalization problem": How do we generalize from the simplest instances of the form of (1) to other instances which involve the application of only a single rule of inference?

A distinct way in which diversity may arise is due to the fact that arguments may contain arguments as parts (by virtue of being chains of simpler arguments). Extended arguments of this sort (chain arguments) can be thought of as involving the application of several inference rules applied sequentially, and as exploiting the transitivity of validity. Considerable attention has been devoted to the problem of characterizing as

---

[4] It should be noted that while I assume that reasoning can be modeled by a system of rules, these need not be restricted to deductive rules. Since almost all discussions of the petitio assume that only valid inferences can commit the fallacy, for the most part I will discuss examples that involve only deductive rules. It is convenient to cite familiar rules of natural deduction systems of deductive logic, but other rules mite equally well be involved. It is (ultimately) an empirical question what rules are actually used in a particular inference.

circular or question-begging complex arguments of this sort.[5] I call this "the projection problem" for characterizing question-begging.

The present paper discusses the generalization problem for begging the question; I will not discuss the projection problem here. I have addressed the generalization problem for circular arguments in another paper. [6]

Since argumentative discourse is discourse, principles which govern all discourse will apply to argumentative discourse as well. The approach taken here exploits this observation. I will sketch the main features of this account.

The great burden of my account will be carried by the notion of CONTEXT of a discourse. In general, the discourse context of an argument includes anything that bears on the interpretation of utterances in the discourse; these will contribute to determining whether an argument has been given and, if one has, what its premises and conclusion are. Thus, for example, context includes such factors as coordinates for roles and status of the participants (such as speaker, addressee, etc.); coordinates for spatial and temporal location; coordinates for indicated objects; perhaps a possible world coordinate; and other factors.[7]

---

[5]See, for example, papers by Hamblin, Mackenzie, Walton, and Woods and Walton cited in the bibliography.

[6]"Circular Reasoning and Begging the Question", manuscript.

[7]For an extensive list of these factors and a brief discussion of each, see Brown and Yule [1983], pp.35 ff.

My strategy is to exploit the fact that discourse context is already required for the interpretation of the utterances or inscriptions that express the propositions that make up an argument. It is assumed that argument identification has already occurred; so appeal to any of these sorts of features in order to identify the premises or conclusion of an argument has already been made. It is assumed that by virtue of some features of the discourse, the point of the argument, the role of the conclusion in the discourse, is apparent to the participants. Thanks to this assumption, then, not all features of context play an active part in explaining the role particular propositions play in a given argument.

For our purposes, we can focus on certain aspects of discourse contexts. Context has been characterized by the terms "mutual knowledge" or "mutual belief", but this terminology can be misleading, suggesting as it does that the propositions that make up the context are known or believed by all the participants. As McCawley has shown, a proposition that is known to be false by the speaker and by the addressees, and known by all to be known to be false by all the others, may nevertheless be part of the context. An example is where certain propositions known to be false are accepted for the sake of argument.

A context[8] at a given stage, s, of a discourse will include

---

[8] The concept of a context developed here is based on that of Karttunen [1974], reported and extended by McCawley [1979] and [1981], and in lectures at the University of Chicago in 1984-85. I have learned so much from Jim McCawley that it is difficult to say exactly what ideas are due to him.

a set of propositions that parties to the discourse take as already "established" for the purposes of the discourse at s or as common knowledge (or common "knowledge") of the participants at s.

A proposition is "established" if it has been accepted by the parties to the discourse. A proposition is accepted by a participant at a stage s in a discourse if he is not disposed to dispute or question or object to that proposition at s (even though he may disbelieve it); let's say that a proposition is challenged by a participant at a stage s in a discourse if he is disposed to dispute, object, or question that proposition at stage s (even if he should believe it).[9]

Assertions (and many other constatives), unless challenged or retracted, cause the proposition that is asserted to be added to the context. A proposition may be removed from a context by a participant challenging or withdrawing it. There are other ways. If a proposition is part of the context and a participant asserts the denial of that proposition, the proposition will be withdrawn from the context (assuming participants notice that its denial has been asserted) unless a withdrawal or challenge occurs. Or again, if a speaker utters a sentence that presupposes a proposition P which is inconsistent with a proposition, Q that is already in the context, then P replaces Q in the context, unless

---

[9]Michael Freidman pointed out to me that the notion of acceptance here is very close to Stalnaker's in [1984], pp. 79-81.

a withdrawal or challenge of what was said occurs.[10] As a discourse proceeds, context changes as propositions are asserted and challenged. So far we have seen that context includes a set of propositions that includes what is commonly accepted by the participants.

These propositions are structured by several relations. In the first place, they will be structured in terms of salience.[11] For example, the propositions most recently added to the context are, other things being equal, more salient. In general, those propositions which are directly relevant to the current topic of the discourse are more salient than those that are less directly relevant or are irrelevant to the topic. In order to grasp the relevance of the currently processed proposition, conceptual knowledge and knowledge of the world relating to the concepts present in the immediate contextual representation or present in the proposition being processed may have to be added to the contextual representation; these will be less salient than the propositions already mentioned, but are still accessible. Because of limitations on memory, some propositions are less accessible than others to inference. (The idea is, roughly, that even some, but not all, propositions that are not salient may be able to be

---

[10]See Lewis [1983]

[11]See McCawley [1979], pp. 385-86 and Lewis [1983], pp. 240-43. I extend the concept of prominence or salience as found in McCawley and Lewis to include propositions, whereas their concept applies to objects in the contextual domain. A general account of discourse will recognize contextual domains, but they will not play a role in the discussion of argument here.

recalled in that context, and so be available for inference, assertion, etc.)

Besides being structured according to salience, the propositions in a context are (at least partially) structured in terms of meaning relations and the evidential relations in which they (are perceived to) enter. Some propositions will be believed (correctly or not) to be expressed by two different utterances; part of the common knowledge shared by discourse participants will be a set of meaning postulates. Some of the propositions will be recognized as logical consequences, immediate or otherwise, of other propositions. Since people make errors in reasoning, perceived evidential relations do not have to be logical consequences, though commonly they will either be logical consequences or inductive consequences. This suggests that the context contains some rules for generating and evaluating evidential relations as commonly accepted.[12]

With this rough description of discourse contexts serving as a guide, let's consider how we might understand the petitio.

For the petitio fallacy to occur, there has to be a question to be begged; this relates to the immediate goal of the argumentative discourse. The paradigm is that of providing

---

[12]Lyons [1977], volume 2, pp. 574 ff. has remarked on the role of general principles of language and logic as contextual variables relevant to the production and understanding of contextually appropriate utterances.

evidence or reasons for some proposition.[13]

Raising the question is represented by a proposition being challenged (or queried; or reservations are, in effect, expressed about its acceptability; or evidence or reasons are requested for accepting it). Let's call this discourse role of questioning a proposition that of the challenger (but the challenger doesn't necessarily do anything as strong as challenge a proposition and the context need not be as adversarial as this term suggests). A challenger expresses (among other things) either that (i) there is reason not to accept P when taken together with the information in the context (contrary to what might have been claimed or was otherwise under consideration; or (ii) questions whether there is any reason to accept P, such reasons being either propositions in the context or propositions new to the context but relevant to P, given what is included in the context. In either case, at this stage of the discourse, if P was in the context it is removed, and if it was not in the context, then it is precluded from being placed in the context by bare assertion (or supposition): that is, the challenger gives notice that P will not be accepted on the basis of simply being asserted. At the same time, it is salient to all participants who understand what has transpired that P has been temporarily precluded from

---

[13]Notice that this need not involve establishing a proposition as known or believed. For example, when given a puzzle or riddle or school math problem, we construct an argument with the conclusion as the answer; but there is usually no question of believing or knowing the initial data or even the conclusion.

the context.

The challenger not only precludes P from the context; the challenger has a conception of what propositions are in the context, of how those (and other) propositions are linguistically and evidentially related to P and to each other, and some sense of the evidential rules that are in the context. In precluding P from the context, he also removes from the context all propositions for which it is salient to him that they immediately imply P. Since participants presume that they are all aware of these propositions and the evidential and linguistic relations among them, the challenger has, by challenging P, implicated that the kind of response sought for excludes those propositions. It is important that this implication be restricted to propositions whose relations to the challenged proposition are salient; otherwise it would be impossible to respond to a challenge by citing as evidence propositions in the discourse context.

The challenger also has a sense of what the conversational goal of the discourse is; he has some idea of what he is asking for in expressing a request for an argument. Each participant will have a conception of what an appropriate response consists of: whether of only propositions (either in the context or new information as well) that are accepted or acceptable to the challenger, that are evidentially related to P in a way acceptable and recognizable to the challenger. Thus, for example, the person advancing the argument--"the responder"-- may believe that an appropriate response can consist of propositions

already accepted by the challenger (whether or not the responder accepts them), or he may believe that the response must consist of propositions that he himself accepts (whether or not the challenger already accepts them); this will be determined by what the responder takes to be the discourse goal.

In giving reasons, certain resources are precluded by the structure of the discourse itself. When P is challenged, P is precluded from and is not acceptable at the current stage of the discourse context (on pain of immediate withdrawal), so it is not available as a premise in a justificatory (or an explanatory) argument. In general, a challenger will accept any inferences from P&Q to P or to Q; from P, Q to P&Q; from Γ, P&Q to P&R; etc. Since these immediate inferences are in almost any context part of the commonly accepted evidential relations among propositions, in precluding the conclusion from the context, the challenger intends also to preclude the premises of such inferences; other evidence, differently related to the proposition in question, is required. Where these inference forms occur in a different argumentative context, they will not have been removed from the context and no pragmatic infelicity occurs. (Similar remarks apply where synonyms and meaning postulates directly relate premise and conclusion. Where these are salient, the respective premise will be removed from the context.)

Our proposal for the simple cases of the form of (1) is that when challenged a proposition is precluded from the context and notice is given that it may not be introduced at the following

stage of the discourse on pain of objection and removal. Our hypothesis for the solution of the generalization problem then is a straightforward generalization of this proposal: the same holds for those propositions standing in salient evidential or meaning relations to the challenged proposition.

It should be pointed out that not just propositions can be challenged; rules of inference may be challenged as well.

Let's look at some examples. Consider Aristotle's example of Universal Instantiation, (2), as a petitio. On the account offered here, such an argument need not beg the question; it depends on the discourse goals. Of course, Aristotle had in mind contexts where the instance, a is P, had been challenged and evidence requested for it. In some contexts such as that, we imagine that a challenger will be aware that the instance follows from the universally quantified proposition, Everything is P. The challenger would recognize that accepting the universal proposition would give sufficient reason for accepting the instance. So in challenging the instance, he implicates that he does not accept the universal proposition, thereby also precluding it from the context. In this sort of case, our account confirms Aristotle's assessment.

It is interesting that arguments of the form Existential Generalization, being the dual of Universal Instantiation, are not cited as being question-begging; after all, it could be reasoned (as it commonly is for Universal Instantiation arguments) that anyone who doubted a proposition such as

Something is immortal would ipso facto have reason to doubt the proposition Zeus is immortal. I suggest that where such an argument does not beg the question it is because the singular proposition taken as a premise had not been precluded from the context; typically (but not always) it will be taken as grounded in experience. But in circumstances where it is salient that the challenger had considered such propositions, I conjecture that a complaint of question-begging will be registered.

Consider next an example[14] where the discourse has two people discussing the question of whether God has a gender. One participant challenges this proposition; the other responds

> God is male (of course); therefore, God is either male or female.

(Notice that this is an example where application of the metaphor of the circle gives the result that the argument is not circular (and consequently not viciously circular.) The challenger may rightly believe that this argument begs the question against her. The account offered here supports this belief. In challenging the proposition that God has a gender, one removes it from the context; but in addition, it is understood that the propositions God is male and God is female are also removed from the context. By asserting as a premise what has been removed from the context, the argument begs the question. Of course, contexts might be described where that would not be understood; in that case, my account would predict that the question is not begged. One has

---

[14] Due to Barker [1976], p.255.

only to test the prediction to test the account. A similar result is obtained for the argument

God exists; therefore, it is possible that God exists

in a context where the conclusion has been challenged.

I now turn to an example which I regard as both more interesting and more difficult for accounts of the petitio. The first sort of example involves arguments where conclusion presupposes a premise:

Rene doubts; therefore, Rene exists.

Imagine a situation where someone has sincerely challenged the conclusion and in response to that challenge a defender offers this argument. The argument begs the question; the problem is how to account for that. On the account presented here, that result follows from the nature of presupposition.

In challenging the proposition Rene exists, that proposition is removed from the context. The challenger conveys that the proposition is, at this stage of the discourse, controversial; after all, in challenging it he has controverted it. How has the arguer responded to this? He has advanced as a premise a proposition that presupposes the conclusion. In presupposing the conclusion, it can be inferred that the arguer takes the conclusion not to be controversial, either because he thinks it to be already a part of the context or because he thinks that the addressee is prepared to add it to the context without

objection.[15] Under the circumstances, one is led to wonder whether the responder is playing in the same park as the other participants. Obviously, either he has failed to understand what is happening in the discourse or he is being uncooperative. (In more complicated circumstances, there may be plausible reasons why such an error occurs.)

The final sort of example I want to examine involves the challenge of a rule rather than of a proposition. This is a rather wide loophole in other accounts of the petitio that philosophers have not hesitated to exploit.[16]

There is clearly something very suspicious about an argument that "justifies" a particular evidential rule by means of an argument that employs that rule in obtaining the conclusion from its premises. For example, the question might be raised whether the argument form of Modus Ponens is valid[17] and in response to that question we are given the argument:

> If M.P. doesn't lead from true premises to a false conclusion in any argument in which it is employed, then it is an acceptable rule of inference. But M.P. doesn't lead from true premises to a false conclusion in any argument in which it is employed. Therefore,

---

[15] For useful discussions of presupposition, see McCawley [1979], [1981]; Lewis [1983]; and Soames [1982].

[16] See Black [1954] for a classic example of this maneuver.

[17] I take a valid form for the example, but an invalid form would do as well: for example, an argument of the form of Denying the Antecedent for the conclusion that Denying the Antecedent is not invalid.

M.P. is an acceptable rule of inference.

Even should we grant that the premises are true and the argument valid, there is something wrong with this argument in this context. What is wrong is readily identifiable on the account of question-begging offered here. In questioning the rule, the proposition that it is an acceptable rule of inference is, of course, removed from the context and is not available as a premise. But the rule itself is also removed from the context and is not available for making arguments. One cannot legitimately employ what has been precluded from the context by a challenge, whether that is a proposition or a rule.

This, then, is a brief sketch of the discourse analytic account of the petitio. A fuller explanation would make explicit the extent to which it depends on pragmatic principles such as those Grice suggests in his theory of implicature. To my knowledge, this account makes accurate predictions about all examples involving basic arguments; if this is confirmed, then the Generalization Problem is solved.

Bibliography

Barker, John [1976] "The Fallacy of Begging the Question" Dialogue 15, 241-55.

Black, Max [1954] "The Inductive Support of Inductive Rules" in Problems of Analysis (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 191-208.

Brown, Gillian and G. Yule [1983] Discourse Analysis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

Hamblin, C.L. [1970] Fallacies (London: Methuen)

Karttunen, Lauri [1974] "Presupposition and Linguistic Context" Theoretical Linguistics 1, 181-94.

Lewis, David [1983] "Scorekeeping in a Language GAme" in Philosophical Papers (New York: Oxford University Press), 233-49.

Lyons, John [1977] Semantics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

Mackenzie, Jim [1984a] "Begging the Question in Dialogue" Australasian Journal of Philosophy 62, 174-81.

_____, [1984b] "Confirmation of a Conjecture of Peter of Spain Concerning Question-Begging Arguments" Journal of Philosophical Logic 13, 35-45.

_____, [1979] Question-Begging in Non-Cumulative Systems" Journal of Philosophical Logic 8, 17-33.

McCawley, James D. [1981] Everything Linguists have Always Wanted to Know about Logic (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press)

_____, [1979] "Presupposition and Discourse Structure" Syntax and Semantics: Presupposition 11, C. -K. Oh and D. Dineen, eds. (New York: Academic Press), 371-88.

Soames, Scott [1982] "How Presuppositions Are Inherited: A Solution to the Projection Problem" Linguistic Inquiry 13, 483-545.

Stalnaker, Robert [1984] Inquiry (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press)

Wilson, Kent [Forthcoming] "Circular Argument", Metaphilosophy

_____, "Circular Reasoning and Begging the Question" manuscript.

Walton, Douglas [1985] "Are Circular Arguments Necessarily Vicious?" American Philosophical Quarterly 22, 263-74.

Woods, John and Douglas Walton [1982] "Question-Begging and Cumulativeness in Dialectical Games" Nous 16, 585-605.

_____ [1975] "Petitio Principii" Synthese 31, 107-27.